

## REFORMING THE CURRICULUM IN A POST-COLONIAL SOCIETY: THE CASE OF HONG KONG<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The current curriculum reform agenda in Hong Kong (Curriculum Development Council, 2001) is enmeshed in the politics of a post-colonial society. Yet, there is not a single view of what post-coloniality means for Hong Kong's school curriculum. Vickers and Kan (2003), for example, have argued that "the political context of educational policy-making in contemporary Hong Kong effectively prevents students from being exposed through the formal curriculum or textbooks to any account of the local and national past that differs from the orthodox, Beijing approved version" (p. 180). At the same time, Chan, Kennedy, and Fok (2005) have noted the repeal of restrictive colonial education legislation in the 1990s and its effects in the post-handover period, giving teachers more freedom to innovate and meet the needs of students with a more varied and relevant curriculum. This tension between restriction and freedom, when coupled with what Wan (2005) has described as a "Confucian managerial ideology" in Hong Kong schools (p. 856), means that curriculum reform is caught up in a political contest at both the macro and the micro levels. Freedom from colonial restraints has not meant unrestricted freedom: while local authorities have full responsibility for the curriculum, both politics and culture continue to drive curriculum and curriculum reform in post-handover Hong Kong.

Yet, curriculum reform is not new to Hong Kong. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the British colonial government experimented with a range of innovations although, as Sweeting and Morris (1993) have pointed out, their education policy focus was not so much on the quality of education as on creating access to schooling. This meant that by 1978, compulsory education had been extended to the age of 15. From 1984 onwards, politics in Hong Kong was dominated by the Sino-British agreement on the return of Hong Kong to China so that colonial governments, at least until the appointment of Chris Patten as Governor, were often reluctant to engage in widespread change. The colonial government's final attempt at curriculum reform, referred to as the Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC),<sup>2</sup> was part of the "the post-Tiananmen pre-handover period, as the departing colonial authorities strove to leave with honor and to show commitment to Hong Kong's future" (Adamson & Morris, 2000, p.10). As such, TOC did not outlast the colonial administration. July 1, 1997 marked not only the end of British colonialism in Hong Kong, and indeed the world, but also the end of TOC. The new government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China inherited a colonial curriculum but it was not to be a lasting legacy.

The focus of this article, therefore, is on analyzing the curriculum reform agenda that has emerged in post-colonial Hong Kong. This agenda was not only post-colonial in time but, as will be argued here, also post-

colonial in substance. The analysis to follow is focused on three broad areas:

- The contexts that shaped reform and the nature of the curriculum reform agenda
- The vision and reality of the reform agenda, especially from the point of view of policymakers
- The public responses to the reform agenda

### **Hong Kong Contexts and the Curriculum Reform Agenda**

#### *Contexts*

Hong Kong's history since the middle of the nineteenth century was dominated by its role as a British colony located on the periphery of the Chinese mainland. Luk (1991) has argued that these twin contexts influenced both educational policy and practice in Hong Kong. The importance of context in shaping and constructing education cannot be underestimated (Peters, 1996; Jones, 1990; Sweeting, 1998). This section explores different aspects of the context in which Hong Kong's current curriculum reform agenda is embedded.

Culturally, Hong Kong is a Chinese society and 95% of its inhabitants are ethnic Chinese. Yet, after 150 years of colonial domination, Hong Kong has become a city where East meets West and where there is a greater acceptance of Western styles of living than is likely to be found in other parts of Asia (Lau & Kuan, 1995, p. 40). Hong Kong has not developed its culture by accumulation and has not relied on tradition (Tam, 2002, pp.123–124; Abbas, 1997). Rather, it is a modern, post-industrial, urban society dominated by a market economy with a blend of cultures, which makes pragmatism, the commitment to practical outcomes and solutions, rather than tradition, its key value.

Hong Kong's historical and cultural contexts have led it to become a modern political system where the city is governed by the Basic Law, a kind of mini-constitution agreed on by British and Chinese authorities prior to the handover. The Basic Law sets out the division of responsibilities between the national government in Beijing and the local HKSAR government. Education is a responsibility of the local government so that centralization, a characteristic of Mainland China's education system, does not apply to Hong Kong. While there are now regular exchanges between mainland and local educational officials, Hong Kong has pursued its own reform agenda.

In general, the degree of change occasioned by the handover, at least in terms of governance, has been minimal. Hong Kong has remained a highly executive-oriented city where the Governor's role has been replaced by the Chief Executive (Huque, Tao, & Wilding, 1997, p. 16; Miners, 1998). It is not a democratic city, although limited political reform was started prior to the handover and has been continued within a

limited framework controlled by Beijing. Yet, democratic aspirations remain high and agendas for more radical reform are pressed strongly by some political parties and groups within civil society.

The political system in Hong Kong is often described as “one country, two systems” reflecting the national aspirations of Mainland China as well as local political aspirations that value the rule of law and representative government. Yet, there are no such tensions when it comes to Hong Kong’s economy, an economy which in many ways the Mainland government is trying to emulate. Hong Kong experienced about 5% per capita yearly growth (in international purchasing power parity, PPP) between 1965–1995 (Rowen, 1998, p. 2). It was one of the six fastest growing economies internationally and became accustomed to changing its economic structure rapidly whenever needed. Before the 1990s, Hong Kong companies, unable to compete with other countries in low cost industries, shifted production to Shenzhen’s special economic zones or even further afield in the Mainland, thereafter concentrating on design and logistics (Naughton, 1997). This marked a shift toward an economic structure even more dominated by financial and commercial services (Chiu, Ho, & Lui, 1997; Haggard, 1998, p. 87). The Asian financial crisis (late 1997) marked a turning point for the Hong Kong economy with a severe depression, an increase in unemployment of less skill-intensive workers, and a loss of competitiveness amidst increased competition from Shanghai and Singapore (Sung, 2002, p. 131). Ritchie (2005) has pointed out that the Asian financial crisis also marked a turning point in highlighting the need for a better educated work force if firms in the region were to maintain their competitive advantage in a more global market place. This is a particularly salient point for Hong Kong since its increasing integration with the Chinese economy, especially as a commercial and financial services hub, meant that “knowledge workers” were seen to be the key to maintaining competitive advantage (Thompson, 2001, p. 236).

These cultural, political, and economic contexts of Hong Kong converged when it came to considering the kind of curriculum that was needed in the post-handover period. The details of the curriculum reform agenda, an agenda that was post-colonial in both time and nature, is described in the next section.

### *The Curriculum Reform Agenda*

In 1999 the Education Commission, Hong Kong’s major education policy advisory body, commenced a review of the education system. The following educational aims were suggested as appropriate for Hong Kong in the twenty-first century:

To enable every person to attain all-round development according to his/her own attributes in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics, so that he/she is capable of life-long learning, critical and exploratory thinking, innovating and adapting to change; filled with self-confidence and a team spirit; willing to put forward continuing effort for the prosperity, progress,

freedom and democracy of his/her society, and contribute to the future and well-being of the nation and the world at large. Our priority should be to enable our students to enjoy learning, enhance their effectiveness in communication and develop their creativity and sense of commitment. (Education Commission, 1999c, p. 15)

Initially, new aims for education were published to set the scene for reform (Education Commission, 1999a). These aims were followed by the publication of the framework for reform (Education Commission, 1999b) and, subsequently, specific reform proposals were published for the Hong Kong education system (Education Commission, 1999c, 2000). With each publication, there were public consultations prior to moving on to the next stage. Large-scale curriculum reform in Hong Kong, based on these successively released documents and the responses to them, was initiated in 2001 and was intended to be fully implemented in stages during a 10-year span, i.e., 2001–05, 2006–2010, and 2010 and beyond. The broad outlines for reform referred to above were eventually translated into curriculum aims and the curriculum reform agenda became known as the “Learning to Learn” reform (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). The principles of these curriculum reforms are outlined below:

1. A shift from transmission of knowledge to acquisition of skills for learning to learn.
2. A focus on national identity and the use of the national language, Putonghua, were highlighted in the curriculum in view of the political change.
3. A broadening of the intellectual knowledge to be acquired from subject-based knowledge to Key Learning Areas (KLA), namely: Chinese Language Education; English Language Education; Mathematics Education; Personal; Social and Humanities Education; Science Education; Technology Education; Arts Education; and Physical Education.
4. The identification of generic skills relating to collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, information technology, numeracy, problem solving, self-management, and study skills were emphasized as to nurture lifelong learning.
5. A deliberate emphasis on four key tasks, i.e., moral and civic education, reading to learn, project learning, and information technology, in order to promote interactive and effective learning and teaching with a focus on students’ self-directed learning.
6. The promotion of new modes of assessment to meet the purposes and processes of learning so that assessment could serve both formative and summative purposes in line with the “learning to learn” philosophy (Curriculum Development Council, 2001).

These changes are complex and dramatic in comparison to the traditional curriculum adopted by schools in Hong Kong. They require shifts in three major directions, i.e., from subject-oriented to generic knowledge and skills in terms of knowledge organization, from traditional classroom teaching and learning to diversified modes of learning in terms of teaching strategies, and from competitive examinations to divergent modes of assessment. These are not like the incremental reforms attempted during the colonial period—they represent a wholesale reform of the basic education system. They have been supplemented by reforms to senior secondary education that will see the abolition of the two major public examinations (at Secondary 5 and Secondary 7) and the implementation of a single examination at Secondary 6 that will become the exit point for the majority of students in the education system. These reforms will increase participation in senior secondary education since currently Secondary 5 is a major exit point for many students. While many of the characteristics of the traditional academic curriculum will be retained (for example, Chinese, English, and Mathematics will be core subjects), a new integrated subject, Liberal Studies, will be introduced as a core component. Thus, from Primary 1 to Secondary 7, Hong Kong's school curriculum has been the subject of radical proposals for change and reform. The issue now is to explain the rationale for such changes in the period after the handover and the prospects for successful implementation. These issues are addressed in the following section.

### **The Vision and Reality of Curriculum Reform— The Views of Hong Kong Policymakers**

As part of an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) project on the future of schooling, Hong Kong policymakers were interviewed to discern their views on the future of schooling in Hong Kong (Kennedy, Lo, & Fairbrother, 2004). One of the distinctive features of the views of Hong Kong policymakers was their linking of the broad educational reform agenda to the way they saw the future. In this section of the article, data from three of the interviews are used to explain how selected policymakers in Hong Kong viewed the reform agenda. Two interviewees were members of the Education Commission, the policy advisory body that formulated the process of education reform in Hong Kong, and the third was a senior government official who had responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the reform agenda. Their identities will remain anonymous since this was a condition for participating in this OECD project.

#### *Personal Influences*

In seeking to understand the rationale for any change agenda, the focus is often on the big issues that stimulated the reforms. As will be shown later, there were some “big issues” in Hong Kong; but an important point to emerge from the interviews was the extent to which the reforms

were also stimulated by the personal interest and leadership of key figures. One interviewee mentioned the personal interest in education taken by the Chief Executive (CE), Tung Chee Hua of the HKSAR government, the replacement for the British colonial Governor. Key policy areas such as education and housing were seen to be of such importance that the CE commissioned papers in these areas, highlighting ideas and issues that could become the subject of policy once the handover took place. The education reform agenda, therefore, was at a planning stage prior to the handover; the incoming government did not wait until its formal accession to power. According to another interviewee, even at this early stage, there were community reservations about the proposed reforms and this led to his comment that “every reform has objecting voices.”

This image of the CE’s educational leadership is corroborated by Sweeting (2004) who reported that Hay-lap Tai, headmaster of a secondary school and a member of the Education Commission, commented that “(t)he SAR Government has put a lot of money into education. That is quite different from before. This is especially true of C. H. Tung. He is very committed to education. That is very true. I think that at some times, he is more committed than the people professionally in the education field” (p. 624).

As well as support from the Chief Executive, one other key person was mentioned. He was Antony Leung, who had been Chair of the University Grants Commission, subsequently became Chair of the Education Commission, and eventually became the Financial Secretary. He was commissioned by the CE to prepare the pre-handover paper on changes needed in education. According to one of the interviewees, Leung’s interest in changing education was quite personal:

Personally, he has a passion for education. He sees himself as a victim of the system who was rejected by the secondary school system. He was regarded as a failure and he wanted to do something about that. He wanted to make sure that students could have a second chance.

This theme was reflected in the reform proposals as the “no loser principle.” It resulted in a strong emphasis on removing barriers to participation, on meeting the needs of all students, and on adopting assessment strategies that emphasize learning rather than examinations whose function is to exclude. These values appear to have had their origin in the values of the person who is perhaps best described as the chief architect of the reform agenda, Antony Leung. He prepared the original paper on reform issues for the Chief Executive, chaired the Education Commission that initiated the reform agenda, and, as Financial Secretary, ensured that funds flowed to support such an ambitious undertaking. The reform agenda may well have eventuated without his involvement; but it does seem that in different ways, especially through his role from within the government, he exerted a considerable personal influence.

### *External Influences*

In addition to personal influences on the reforms, there were also

external influences noted by all interviewees. The one point on which the three interviewees agreed was that the forces for change were external to schools. For the senior government official, the changes to the economy were a motivating factor: “if you don’t improve language ability and creativity—Hong Kong will die in 5 years.” For another, there were changing demands for the workforce, “...the commerce parties are concerned more with the quality of student’s attitude, rather than just knowledge. If you talk to heads from business or industry, they all say basic education is not to train students to be employable, it’s basic education! Let’s stick to basic and generic skills.” For the third interviewee, social and economic changes have challenged the traditional role of education so that either education changes or it will be replaced: “we think we monopolize knowledge and everything has to be learnt here...this is no longer true.” While each of the interviewees chose to highlight one key feature that influenced the reforms, the key issue was that pressures for change came from outside schools, not within them. What is more, the rationales referred to above were primarily instrumental. While the reform agenda was driven by the government, its fundamental rationale lay in the community, in particular, in the business community. This point will be returned to in the third section.

In an important sense, the external pressures for change make the current reform agenda in Hong Kong different from previous efforts. Attempts to change pedagogy, subject content, and assessment strategies in the past more often than not stemmed from broad educational rationales often linked to progressivist values. As Law (2003) has pointed out, such attempts were very often at odds with local cultural values that emphasized the transmission of knowledge, rote memorization, and examinations. The current reform agenda often seems to have similar student-centered objectives to the older attempts at change. Yet, Kennedy (2005) has argued that this student focus does not stem solely from a child-centered progressivism but also includes social efficiency and even social reconstruction dimensions. The social efficiency dimension of the reforms can be seen in their link to economic priorities and the often-expressed need for an innovative and creative workforce to meet the demands of the “new economy.” The social reconstruction dimension can be seen in a new emphasis on inclusion and the move from elite to a mass system of education. These different “progressivisms,” also reflected in the views of Hong Kong policymakers, coalesce to produce what Kennedy (2005) has called the “new progressivism”—a pastiche of values and theoretical underpinnings. This clearly marks and differentiates the current reforms from their predecessors. These are reforms for post-modern times and their impact is meant to be felt far beyond the classroom. This point will be raised again toward the end of the article.

### *Implementation and Prospects*

The complexity of the reform agenda in terms of its breadth, its radical nature, and its implications for community development raises an important question about its implementation. Kennedy, Lo, and Fairbroth-

er (2004) have referred to the fragility of the implementation process because of its excessive reliance on the leadership of principals and the skills and knowledge of classroom teachers. This emphasis was also highlighted by the three interviewees whose views have been used to inform this article. Each one of them mentioned leadership and the need for teachers to take up the reform proposals. Each was also very positive about the prospects for success with one of the members of the Education Commission stating that in many ways schools were well ahead of the government in trying new things. The senior government official was able to give instances of schools that had taken up reform initiatives and the personal observations of schools where good things were happening. From policymakers' perspectives, therefore, while the road ahead was still a difficult one, there was some confidence that the reform agenda was achievable.

The reliance placed on teachers as a key to the success of the reforms raises an interesting issue about the role of teachers in post-handover Hong Kong. Chan, Kennedy, and Fok (2005) have noted that one important feature of the post-handover government has been the move away from treating teachers as mere technicians. The government was able to do this because legislation relating to the role of the education bureaucracy in screening curriculum content, especially of a political nature, the approval of textbooks, and the issuing of restrictive syllabus guides had been repealed in the 1990s. In the post-handover period, these issues remain sensitive, but teachers have been given new professional opportunities in a context of limited legislative restrictions. Much more is now expected of them in terms of generic syllabus guides that need interpretation at the school site level and new textbooks that are not as prescriptive as earlier ones. It is not too much to speak of a "new professionalism" for teachers in Hong Kong as schools are urged to cater for the specific needs of their student populations and the "one-size-fits-all" approach to the curriculum is discarded. Yet, such freedom is not without its attendant problems.

Kennedy, Lo, and Fairbrother (2004), for example, have pointed out that this focus on school personnel also means that any failures related to the reforms can also be attributed to them. Morris (1996) has also noted this culture of blame mentality as a feature of earlier reforms in Hong Kong and argued that the government can protect itself from blame when the onus and responsibility for success rests with schools, their leaders, and teachers. This process of blame may not be unique to Hong Kong—teachers rarely enjoy a good public press, irrespective of the jurisdiction where they practice. Yet, as a policy mechanism, relying on teachers for successful implementation is a fragile process. Governments have no real option—teachers are frontline workers and classrooms are where the reforms have to work. Yet, teachers are not automatons, and given the value-laden nature of any reform agenda, processes of interpretation and redevelopment are inevitable. Thus, it is likely that there will be versions and approximations of the reform agenda in different schools rather than mirror images of the original proposals. The new professionalism allows for this, and international experience with reform efforts suggests it is an obvious outcome, although perhaps not one envisaged by all policymakers.

The kind of teacher professionalism envisaged in the reforms requires more than just good theories if it is to translate into successful implementation. The senior government official commented on arrangements to support implementation:

This is the second phase of the reform. The focus is on curriculum and pedagogy, teacher development, including teacher education programs, mentorship, and induction. Curriculum reform is taking off, with syllabuses and curriculum guides in every subject being rolled out. Teacher development has to be improved so that lofty ideas can become reality.

Chan, Kennedy, and Fok (2005) have characterized the kind of teacher development referred to in the above quotation as “soft policy”<sup>3</sup> measures designed to persuade teachers of the benefits of implementation. Such measures included professional development workshops, seminars, briefings, guidelines, school-based curriculum development, non-mandatory textbooks, and any other measure that can both support and persuade teachers. The HKSAR government’s seriousness in supporting the reforms in this way is reflected in the increase in expenditures on education. Between 1993/1994 and 2004/2005, the ratio of expenditure on education to GDP increased from 2.7% to 4.7%, with the sharpest increase taking place after 1997/1998 (Education Commission, 2004, p. 5). Yet, there remains a doubt about the effectiveness of implementation to the point where the impact of the reform agenda on schools is now a significant public policy issue.

The issue is not about the availability of professional development opportunities since often teachers are overwhelmed by the choices. Cheng and Lam (2002, pp. 27–28) have argued that these opportunities have not been sufficient to support the needs of teachers; and Fok (2005) has reported that often the nature of the courses has meant that teachers have not been able to acquire the skills they need for successful implementation. The Hong Kong Teachers’ Association (2005) has also identified problems with teacher professional development in terms of both the quality of the courses and the extent to which they add to teacher workload. It is this latter issue that has emerged as the most significant. It was highlighted in successive surveys carried out by the Professional Teachers’ Union in 2003 and 2005 (Professional Teachers’ Union, 2006) but became highly politicized when the Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower (PSEM) made some unfortunate comments that sought to downplay the tragedy of two teacher suicides as being unrelated to the workload caused by the reforms: “If their death is related to the education reforms, why did only two teachers [commit suicide]?”<sup>4</sup> (Coates, 2006).

The result of the above comment was that 10,000 teachers—some 20% of the teaching workforce in Hong Kong—marched on the streets to protest against both the PSEM and what they perceived to be high workloads and stress levels resulting from the reforms. It is not clear that the curriculum reforms were the immediate targets of the protests—there is a much wider reform agenda in Hong Kong that includes basic competency assessment, external school review, and school closure policies in response

to declining demographics; and these are more likely to create stress than curriculum reform. Nevertheless, in this now highly politicized climate, the government has eased the pressure and come up with a new package of measures designed to relieve teacher workload and stress. It remains to be seen how this new environment will affect the implementation of reforms and whether the momentum for reform can be regained in what is a new climate characterized by politicization, resistance, and a public policy environment that favors harmonization rather than confrontation.

### **The Public's Response to the Reform Proposals**

A reform agenda as large-scale as the current proposals could not be introduced in Hong Kong without the widespread consultation that was also a key feature of education policymaking in colonial times. In fact, public consultation on major decisions being proposed by the government and its advisory bodies is so well established and expected in Hong Kong that some writers refer to it as “rule by consultation” (Lo, 1999, p. 73). One reason for its emphasis on consultation is the lack of legitimacy of a government that is not democratically elected. Thus, it reverts directly to the people on every issue to assess the limits of its capacity to make widespread changes and as a means of identifying and reconciling any major differences with the public. This it did with the education reform proposals, and the public’s responses, or at least those responses that are publicly available, are discussed below.

The reform proposals were presented to the public in three stages—with the focus successively on *Aims of Education* (Education Commission, 1999a), *A Framework for Reform* (Education Commission, 1999b), and *Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* (Education Commission, 2000)—with a total of 10 months provided for public consultation. Antony Leung, Chairman of the Education Commission and chief architect of the reforms, described the purposes of the consultation process:

When we set out to do the consultation, we have two objectives in mind, one is to really listen to the views of the public; second is to ignite fire, so to speak, that is to really lift the community enthusiasm about the education in Hong Kong, which is the enthusiasm really needed for us to continue our reform in Hong Kong (Leung, 1999, p. 1).

Leung’s own description of the consultation process, at least in its first stage, suggests that it was a process that genuinely sought to communicate the substance of the reforms as well as to listen to the public:

We received over 14,000 written comments from the public...we also have seen hundreds of articles being written in all the newspapers about education. I mean every day there are a number of articles being written and I think that it will continue as well...I and other members of the Education Commission as well as the working groups have attended over fifty consultation sessions with all walks of the community, the educators, teachers, princi-

pals, students, parents, political parties, employers and various education groups as well as members from the social service community, youth workers, etc. (Leung, 1999, p.1).

The second round of consultations did not seem to attract quite so much attention but were nevertheless impressive—“2,670 written submissions...34 public forums with attendance exceeding 10,000 people...100 consultation sessions organized by various sectors of the community...” (Education Commission, n.d.). There does not appear to be direct access to the records of these consultations although summaries were made by the Education Commission’s Secretariat and made public (Education Commission Secretariat, n.d.). Responses came from different sections of the community—business, academics, teachers, and community groups. The responses from different sectors, referred to below, are illuminating.

#### *Business Community*

Overall, there was general support for the proposed aims of education and the kind of changes being proposed by the Education Commission. Language skills (biliteracy and trilingualism)<sup>5</sup>, analytical thinking, creativity, and problem solving were endorsed by most participants as key outcomes of schooling. These outcomes were based on two main assumptions. One was clearly expressed by the representative of the Hong Kong Federation of Industries: “with the dependency of economic development on new technology, we need to reform the current system in order to adapt to the enormous changes and needs.” The other was related to a lack of confidence in the current system as expressed by the Employers’ Federation of Hong Kong: “the current system as we can see appears to focus heavily on training for examination achievements, and tends to ignore the development of the individual” (Leung, 1999, p. 6). Even the Civil Service Bureau argued that “passing exams is not sufficient, children need to have a much wider educational experience, and for that, it’s not just what they learn in the classroom” (Leung, 1999, p. 18). Thus, needs stimulated by economic changes and dissatisfaction with the current system led to a general endorsement by the business community of the proposed aims of education.

This endorsement by representatives of the business community was by way of endorsing what had been included in the proposals for reform. A number of other business representatives referred to what was missing. Most importantly, this included vocational education and training and the technical skills that Hong Kong would need in the future. The Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce referred to the “grammar school system which we have inherited from Britain” (Leung, 1999, p. 14) and its inability to cater to the needs of all students. A business sector member of the Commission pointed out that vocational education in mainland Europe was a viable option in the education system while it was not in Hong Kong. He questioned whether the Hong Kong reform proposals were radical enough, since they had not really questioned the academic structure of schooling and had made no provision for vocational education.

Underlying the reference to vocational education and learning was

an even stronger assumption referred to by a number of business organizations—it concerned the role and function of schooling. The Employers' Federation of Hong Kong argued that “the education system is in reality providing quality human resources to employers. Schools and universities should prepare students at an earlier stage to ensure a smooth integration to the business community” (Leung, 1999, p. 7) while a representative from the international business community asserted that “we owe (it) to ourselves as an employer and educator to ensure that we have the appropriately developed manpower to further the prosperity of Hong Kong” (Leung, 1999, p. 10). The Civil Service Bureau presented an equally instrumental view: “...whatever we want, frankly, we should be able to influence, not just because we are the biggest employers, but we also control the Education Department and we should be able to control the Vocational Training Council” (Leung, 1999, p.16). This kind of instrumentalism is not new and is not confined to Hong Kong. Yet, it is important to understand that the business community's acceptance of the reforms seems to be based on the instrumental view that the proposed reforms would benefit the manpower needs of Hong Kong. These were not “educators' reforms”—they were reforms for altered economic conditions in a rapidly changing society.

#### *Academic Community*

This business orientation of the reforms was reinforced by the responses that came from members of the academic community in Hong Kong. On the one hand, some of these responses supported the view that the reforms are largely instrumental in nature while others challenge the educational basis of the reforms. These are not necessarily conflicting positions, but they do highlight the complex nature of the reform agenda.

Kennedy (2005) and Elliott and Morris (2001) have supported the view that the current curriculum reforms were linked to the instrumental needs of the local economy. Elliott and Morris (2001, p. 147) argued that it was increasingly difficult to predict the future commodity value of particular learning outcomes in the form of specific knowledge and skills for the labor market. Aims such as “learning to learn” and lifelong learning were seen to enable students to cater for changing and less predictable situations in the future (Elliott & Morris, 2001, p. 156). They argued that the Hong Kong curriculum reform framework embodied a Darwinian perspective in relationship to education and the economy. Students developed their capacities, talents, and skills for enabling society to sustain itself for a transient economic environment (Elliott & Morris, 2001, pp. 156–157). Kennedy (2005, p. 14) supported this view by showing how changes to economic theory supported the change in direction of Hong Kong's school curriculum. Economic development driven by creativity and new ideas required a school curriculum that would produce graduates with these capacities.

Whether or not these instrumental interpretations are correct, other academics pointed to additional flaws in the reform agenda. Tsang (1999), for example, criticized the Education Commission and the HKSAR for not providing any empirical diagnosis or evidence to justify why the Hong

Kong education system should be reformed. He argued that three features of the system were causing devastating effects on schooling: the segregated and elitist secondary school system, the accumulating and amplifying differentials in students' academic achievement, and an intensive examination drilling culture. Yet none of these problems were directly identified as part of the reform proposals. Lau (1999) stressed that the educational reform did not include values education. He argued that the culture of Hong Kong emphasized materialistic, sensate, external, economic, and rationally instrumental issues. His view was that schooling should not perpetuate this kind of culture. Lam (2001), who analyzed the reforms from the perspective of curriculum theory, commented that the framework of the curriculum was unsatisfactorily designed and without theoretical support. The aims of KLAs (Key Learning Areas) were not clear or substantial in themselves. Examples like Geography and Chinese Language were obviously ill-designed (Lam, 2001, pp. 138–140). Moreover, based on a review of the documents from the Curriculum Development Council (e.g., 2000, 2002), he argued that the conceptions of curriculum integration in official documents were vague and little more than the reorganization of subject-based knowledge. Furthermore, the stances of officials often shifted from time to time so the real intentions of the reform could not be identified (Lam, 2002, pp. 82–84). These critics generally agreed that the curriculum reform was large in scope, did not have a main focus, and did not reform education in a direction moving toward justice or quality.

#### *Teachers and Other Community Groups*

Given the differences of opinion between the business community and academics on the reform agenda, the views of teachers and other community groups are of some interest. Yet, it is not so easy to capture the views of different groups specifically on the curriculum reforms because the reform agenda extended across every sector of education from early childhood to universities. Different groups, because of their constituencies, often focused on only part of the agenda. Nevertheless, it is possible to gain an impression of broad community reactions and responses and these are outlined below.

Groups representing teachers—the Professional Teachers' Union (PTU) (1999), the Hong Kong Primary Education Research Association (HKPERA) (2000), and Education Convergence<sup>6</sup> (2000)—were not in agreement. The first two of these groups, PTU and HKPERA, appeared to be broadly supportive of the “blueprint” for reform that was being proposed. Yet, Education Convergence was not, arguing that the so-called “blueprint” was not well designed and was incapable of capturing the spirit of holistic reform that was being advocated. According to Education Convergence, there was a lack of specificity and concrete detail about how broad strategies would be translated into practice. This issue of lack of detail and the idealistic nature of the aims of the reform was picked up more generally in the Education Commission Secretariat's (n.d.) summary of public responses to aims of the reforms. The education community, it seems, was looking for

concrete proposals, with some indication of “the impact on front line workers” (Education Commission Secretariat, n.d., p. 2). Somewhat ironically, it is the question of impact that has now come to the fore as workload issues dominate public debates about the reform agenda.

A similar critical voice was also evident in the views expressed by the Hong Kong Federation of Students (2000), a confederation of tertiary institution student unions. Naturally, their focus was more on the proposals for university reform than on the school-level proposals. Yet, their opposition to the economic constructions of education contained in the reforms was also reflected in views that came from the school sector. The tertiary students were supportive of the extension of university degree programs from three to four years, but felt that the imposition of university fees put too much pressure on them and interfered with their “whole person education,” a key element of the reforms at all levels of education. The importance of these views is that they demonstrate how some community groups were inclined to construct their response to the reforms in line with their own particular interests.

Other groups took a broader view. The Hong Kong Federation of Women (2000), for example, endorsed the direction of the reforms and saw them as catering for the development of society. It stressed the need for articulation across the sectors in order to ensure a coordinated approach and cautioned that progressive implementation would be preferred, starting with kindergarten and primary first, then gradually moving to other levels. Teacher training was seen to be the key to successful implementation. The Hong Kong Christian Service was also supportive of the reforms but, somewhat like the Hong Kong Federation of Students, it wanted to see a “humanistic” conception of education adopted rather than one based on economic considerations. It wanted to see the focus on “overall and individual development of students, the development of mutual respect, concern, and support, and the promotion of a spirit of cooperation among students” (Hong Kong Christian Service, 2000). Such a view was not inconsistent with the reform proposals.

This focus on overall and individual development was taken up toward the end of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Convocation (2000) submission to the consultation. The submission saw the merits in such innovative proposals and, indeed, provided many concrete suggestions about how they could be improved. Yet, they observed that too much emphasis was placed on skill development and not enough on moral education and called for efforts to develop the capacity in students to be caring and respectful to others. The moral dimension of education has always been important in Chinese societies. While the CUHK Convocation recognized Hong Kong’s needs to confront the challenges of the twenty-first century, it did not feel that this necessarily meant forsaking traditional values. Again, this view was not inconsistent with the reforms but it was obviously seen as being important enough to reiterate as part of the public consultation process.

That conceptions of curriculum and curriculum reform differed across different groups in the community should not be a surprise. These

differences highlight the point that Hong Kong's reform agenda was driven more by the views of the business community than any of the community voices that made themselves heard. Yet, surprisingly, this did not mean an outright rejection of the reform agenda by community groups—just a registering of alternative conceptions by academics and other community groups. It is for this reason that Hong Kong's current reforms differ from earlier colonial attempts—they are deeply rooted in what is perceived to be the future needs of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region—needs defined by the first post-colonial government.

Post-colonial status brought to Hong Kong the opportunity to chart its own future as a major outpost of the People's Republic of China. That it chose to see itself largely in economic terms was not inconsistent with either policy directions in Beijing or often-expressed local needs for "rice-bowl" security. That it was also in opposition to the grammar school tradition of colonial times was perhaps inevitable since education systems globally, and particularly in the Asian region, have been seeking change and reform to meet new challenges and priorities (Department of Curriculum and Instruction, 2002). It is this underlying instrumentalism that has guided the curriculum reform agenda in Hong Kong despite the reservation of academics and some members of the community. The humanistic tradition is alive in Hong Kong; it simply has not provided the foundation for the current reform agenda.

### **Conclusion**

Post-handover Hong Kong has located itself as a key regional economic center and gateway to mainland China. Its political status as a Special Administrative Region of China highlighted the potential of these roles. Consequently, the school curriculum needed to be realigned to try to provide the foundation for achieving such goals. There was no external pressure on Hong Kong to choose this pathway. In the post-colonial period, the HKSAR government was able to chart its own educational future. It did this with a characteristic pragmatism as it sought to carve out for itself a role in the new global economic order as well as the new political order of which it was a part after July 1, 1997.

The Hong Kong SAR government took education and educational change seriously in the post-colonial era. It provided resources, vision, and direction for the reform agenda. Yet, its key policymakers and advisors identified teachers and educational leaders as keys to the success of the reforms. Success, therefore, will depend on the extent to which the "hearts and minds" of teachers can be won. There is no shortage of opportunities for school personnel to engage in professional development, although recently, there has been a marked public resistance to the increasing demands being made of teachers. This may not be the biggest issue facing the reforms, but technical capacity to undertake new forms of curriculum development, new styles of teaching, and different approaches to assessment remains an important issue.

Of greater significance may be the residual effect of a traditional

examination-oriented culture that has served to ration education for Hong Kong's elites. This was true in colonial times and even the far-ranging reform agenda does not envisage that the participation rate in universities will exceed 18% of the age cohort. Thus, while examination pressures will be eased at the end of both primary and secondary schooling, the competition for places in local universities will continue. As long as there is competition in the system and as long as the rewards for success include material benefits, the reform agenda will always be under challenge. Confronting this macro issue will be essential for the future if the micro reform agenda is to have any chance of success by the target date of 2010.

### **End Notes**

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<sup>2</sup> Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC) was initiated in 1993 to reform the Chinese Language, English Language, and Mathematics curriculum and to develop students' fundamental ways of using communication, conceptualization, inquiry, problem-solving, and reasoning.

<sup>3</sup> "Soft policy" as opposed to "hard policy" or the use of legislation to force compliance.

<sup>4</sup> Original in Chinese.

<sup>5</sup> Biliteracy refers to the learning of Chinese and English, and trilingualism refers to the learning of Chinese, English, and Putonghua languages.

<sup>6</sup> A group made up of education workers, including lecturers in tertiary institutes and principals and teachers in secondary, primary, special schools, and kindergartens.

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